



# Forest Conflict in Asia: Undermining Development, Security, and Human Rights



## Why Is Forest Conflict Important?

**I**NCIDENTS OF VIOLENT CONFLICT OVER FOREST RESOURCES AND forestland are widespread in the developing countries of Asia and are reported in the news media daily. Forest conflict undermines attempts to improve governance, retards economic development, impoverishes rural people, and impairs key environmental functions.

Governments and rebel groups in several Asian countries have used tropical timber to bankroll armed conflict, while low-level conflict over forests occurs in most of the tropical developing countries of the region. In many of these countries, politicians and security forces harvest timber to get cash to buy political support and fund operations, often using intimidation and violence to overcome resistance from communities that depend on forests for their livelihoods. Without access to forest resources, these already poor people become further impoverished.

Politicians and security officials who put their own interests above the welfare of their fellow citizens undermine the legitimacy of the state, create animosity that fuels more violence, and destroy a renewable resource for economic development, all of which contribute to state fragility. Disregard for the rule of law and the human rights of forest communities creates an atmosphere in which forests and land become open access resources, encouraging behavior that results in conflict.

Small-scale illegal loggers take advantage of the chaotic environment created by conflict logging, clashing with local communities, law enforcement officials, and each other. Logging roads leave forests vulnerable to poor farmers seeking small plots of land as well as powerful people seeking to illegally “grab” large tracts of forestland. Land grabbing by either group causes serious conflict with established communities that have lost their forests and will fight to retain their land.

Forest conflict, illegal logging, and forest degradation are closely linked and lead to broader economic, social, and environmental impacts: governments do not capture revenues from conflict timber; the economic welfare and social structure of forest communities are weakened; and the ability of forests to produce goods and provide services is reduced. The food security of farmers is threatened when forest degradation changes river flow patterns and increases sediment levels, reducing the productivity of irrigated rice fields. Degraded tropical forests are at increased risk for catastrophic fires that result in forest conversion to grasslands with very limited agricultural or environmental



value. The poor logging practices that characterize illegal logging greatly diminish the biodiversity value of forests, which is further reduced when logging crews and security forces poach wildlife and fish.

## What Causes Forest Conflict?

**F**OREST CONFLICT RESULTS FROM POOR GOVERNANCE — SPECIFICALLY the lack of accountability and corruption of government and military officials and the failure to establish and enforce laws that grant access to forest resources and forestland in a way that is transparent and seen as legitimate by all stakeholders. Most developing countries in Asia have failed to equitably allocate and sustainably manage their forests, leading to steep declines in the quantity and quality of this valuable resource. Expanding road networks, increasing populations, and exposure to global trade networks have made Asia’s forests vulnerable and more attractive to those wishing to liquidate them for their own ends. The decline of forests, coupled with greater demand for forest products in growing economies, is driving a rush to claim remaining timber and, after that, the land itself.

Military forces in many countries of the region are partially or entirely self-funding, adding a deadly dimension to forest conflict. In Indonesia, military units are expected to raise about two-thirds of their operating budgets, which they typically do through logging and other illegal activities. In Cambodia in the early 1990s, both the Khmer Rouges and the government forces financed their military campaigns and political activities through timber sales. This tradition has continued as Cambodian field units are expected to “live off the land.” In Burma, both rebel groups and government forces harvest timber to fund military operations. Easy access to wood-hungry markets in Thai-

land and Vietnam make it easy to sell conflict timber from Burma, Cambodia, and the Lao PDR, while much of Indonesia's conflict timber is processed domestically or enters legitimate export channels.

### How Can Forest Conflict Be Reduced and Managed?

**C**ONTROLLING FOREST CONFLICT IS A KEY ASPECT OF THE larger goal of sustainably managing forests to contribute to state revenues, poverty alleviation, and environmental services for the long term. Growing populations, economic development, and changing patterns of demand for forest resources and land inevitably lead to conflict in the forests of developing countries. Governments should manage their forests and the conflicts over them in ways that are equitable and make economic and environmental sense. Responses to conflict must be developed case by case, within an effective and legitimate governance framework.

The key elements of a conflict management framework are:

- Laws and institutions designed to allocate forest resources and forestland rationally and justly to promote development, uphold the rights of forest dwellers, and protect the environment.
- A system of participatory land-use planning and forest zoning through which explicit tradeoffs can be made among competing uses.
- A means to legally assign control over forest resources and forestland through recognition of traditional ownership systems, community forest management agreements, land title to individuals and communities, or commercial concessions.
- A transparent means to enforce allocation decisions and hold all stakeholders accountable, including politically powerful people and the military.
- A means to mediate conflicts informally or through the judicial system. Judges must be impartial and trained to adjudicate natural resource conflicts.

USAID's Asia and Near East Bureau, working with ARD, Inc., initiated a project in August 2003 titled **Managing Conflict in Asian Forest Communities (MCAFC)** to analyze the types and causes of forest conflict; identify approaches to reducing conflict; and communicate the seriousness of this problem to governments, the private sector, the donor community, and the U.S. public. This work builds on the findings of a previous USAID project, also implemented with ARD, entitled **Conflict Timber: Dimensions of the Problem in Asia and Africa**. This project identified the extent to which timber is used to finance armed conflict and drive other types of conflict on these two continents and produced a three-volume report that sparked growing interest in forest conflict among policymakers, donor organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

As of December 2005, the ongoing MCAFC project had achieved the following:

- Conducted a major multistakeholder workshop in collaboration with USAID/Philippines that developed approaches to reducing natural resource conflict and gained support from key Philippines government agencies.
- Conducted a comprehensive assessment of forest conflict in Cambodia, followed by a major multistakeholder workshop in collaboration with USAID/Cambodia. On the basis of workshop recommendations, the project supported two NGOs in building the capacity of forest communities to defend their forest use rights and reduce conflict with illegal loggers and encroachers.
- Conducted an assessment of watershed-level natural resource conflict in Sri Lanka in the context of the armed conflict in collaboration with USAID/Sri Lanka.
- Conducted an assessment in Nepal to examine the relationship between natural resource conflict and state fragility in collaboration with USAID/Nepal.
- Hosted a multistakeholder forum in Washington, D.C., to bring leaders from government, the forest industry, and NGOs together to build partnerships to reduce forest conflict in Asia through both improved governance and greater awareness of wood sourcing policies and procedures.
- Implementing a communications strategy, including establishing a forest conflict website ([www.ardinc.com/projects/project.php?area=Regions&tid=270](http://www.ardinc.com/projects/project.php?area=Regions&tid=270)), presentations at key international fora, publications aimed at general audiences, and a professional video on forest conflict in Asia aimed at a general audience.

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**Note:** For more information about how forest conflict in Asia is undermining development, security, and human rights, visit the website cited above.